

The 24th Kitakyushu Conference on Asian Women

For the two days of Saturday and Sunday, November 9 and 10, 2013, the Kitakyushu Conference on Asian Women was held at the Kitakyushu Municipal Gender Equality Center (MOVE). This year's conference took place as an event to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Kitakyushu Forum on Asian Women and the 50th anniversary of the City of Kitakyushu.

On the 9th, the first day, an international symposium titled "Women's Greater Participation in Japan and the World Brings Positive Change" was held jointly by the City of Kitakyushu and the Kitakyushu Municipal Gender Equality Center (MOVE).

In the symposium's keynote speech, Ms. Yukako UCHINAGA, one of the female business leaders, spoke about the use of women's abilities from the strategic standpoint of companies. In the subsequent panel discussion, discussion was held with reference to the example of Norway, one of the world's most advanced countries where women have been successfully demonstrating their abilities in society, as well as the examples of South Korea and Kitakyushu.

On November 10, a cultural exchange event between women's organizations in the City of Kitakyushu and the Incheon Metropolitan City was held to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the conclusion of the sister city relationship between the two cities.

In addition, a panel exhibition took place to review KFAW's 20 years of activities.

◆Keynote Speech

"Utilize Women's Abilities as a Corporate Strategy – a Message to Companies and Women –"

Ms. Yukako UCHINAGA

(Board Chair, Incorporated Non-profit Organization J-Win)

Importance of Diversity

In this age of information and globalization, how to establish a new business model and how to increase the level of customer satisfaction are truly crucial. What are required in this situation are innovative attempts and creative ideas and sense of value.

With this as a background, diversity – the approach of striving to actively use a wide variety of human resources with different values and from different cultural backgrounds – is now regarded as an important business strategy throughout the world.



Ms. Yukako UCHINAGA

Diversity as a Corporate Strategy

In 1993, Louis Gerstner assumed the position of chairperson of IBM, which was suffering from sluggish business results in those days. Emphasizing the promotion of management diversity as one of the important elements for the company's drastic reform, he established a target to be achieved by IBM group companies in the world: making a full use of women's abilities, who form a major "minority" group in the world. At IBM Japan, a group was established to strive for the promotion of the use of women's abilities. As a result of the group's discussion, the following three problems to be solved were revealed:

1) No role model was available in the workplace, which made it difficult for female workers to draw their future pictures.

→Presenting opportunities for exchanging information by holding seminars for all female workers and panel discussions for female managers

2) It was difficult to strike a good balance between careers and household chores/childcare.

→Adopting a working scheme by which workers could select their working places and hours more flexibly, and establishing a corresponding assessment system

3) It was difficult for female workers to join in a so-called "old boys network." (an organizational culture that has been nurtured in a male-dominant society by male workers to do business smoothly.)

→Encouraging workers to understand how organizational cultures differ between men and women, changing the corporate climate, and establishing a women's network

As a result of the above efforts, five years later, the company successfully achieved the target of increasing the percentage of female managers to the same level as male managers. This was made possible by the top management's strong belief in the importance of using women's capabilities as a corporate strategy. The company subsequently realized a V-shaped turnaround.

Messages to Companies and Women

Working women should set up goals regarding their careers. If any opportunity is given, you need to try to make full use of it, regardless of the way in which you do so. This will certainly improve your skills. It is tough for both men and women to pursue their career, but it also brings you joy of self-realization. If you decide to generate certain achievements in your career, you must never give up.

For companies, the use of women's capabilities does not simply entail HR policy; it is confirmed that such use is imperative in making Japanese business society even more competitive. The first step toward promoting diversity management is the use of women's capabilities, although this is not the ultimate goal. It is hoped that many more companies will use women's capabilities in order to make Japan even more competitive.

Panel Discussion

Panelists

Ms. Yukako UCHINAGA

(Board Chair, Incorporated Non-profit Organization J-Win)

Mr. Bjørn MIDTHUN

(Minister-Counselor, Royal Norwegian Embassy)

Ms. Mihee HONG

(Head of Division Policy Research, Incheon Foundation for Women and Family)

Ms. Junko KOMORITA

(Representative Director, Zm'ken Service Co., Ltd.)

Coordinator

Ms. Mitsuko HORIUCHI (KFAW President)

From Mr. Bjørn MIDTHUN of the Royal Norwegian Embassy

He explained mainly about the current situation of Norway, a country of gender equality, as well as about the country's measures to realize women's participation in society and achieve an appropriate work-life balance.

Currently, in Norway, there are many women active in society. Of particular note is that in politics women account for 40% of the national assembly members and 50% of the cabinet members, and a woman has assumed the position of prime minister. This indicates that the percentage of women in decision-making processes is extremely high.

What has encouraged this trend is the country's quota system and childcare support system to enable mothers to return to their work after childbirth. Particularly, the establishment of many more nursery facilities and the paid childcare leave system, as well as the Papa Quota scheme which encourages more fathers to participate in childcare, enable men and women to cooperate in childcare and women to work without hesitation.

As a result, the women's labor force participation rate of Norway is relatively high among OECD countries, and the country's birthrate is also high.



Mr. Bjørn MIDTHUN

From Ms. Mihee HONG of South Korea

She spoke about women's participation in the politics of South Korea and Incheon Metropolitan City, as well as the background to the election of the country's first female president. In South Korea, a quota system was introduced in the field of politics, which has increased women's participation in politics. She also explained about changes in the percentages of women among national and local assembly members, as well as about the country's election system.



Ms. Mihee HONG

In South Korea, pro and con discussions are underway regarding the quota system. However, it is true that the system has increased the percentages of female national

and local assembly members. The system is necessary for promoting women's empowerment in South Korea.

From Ms. Junko KOMORITA, the Top Manager of a Construction Company

Ms. Junko KOMORITA has received the Mayor's Prize at the City of Kitakyushu Work Life Balance Awards as an individual and as a company respectively, as well as the Women's Challenge Prize from the Cabinet Office of Japan in 2013. She shared her own experiences about her attempts to use women's abilities.



Her company has adopted designs generated from the perspective of women as ordinary citizens, and employed a work sharing scheme to enable female employees at different life stages to work. In the male-dominated construction industry, she implemented management that could be made possible only by a woman, and promoted nationwide community creation projects by the Female Construction Design Team, which are helping the company generate favorable business results.

Ms. Junko KOMORITA

Free Discussion

Discussion was held regarding the positive effects that the use of women's capabilities will have on businesses and the entire society, as well as regarding the necessity of a quota system, based on the examples of Norway and South Korea. In addition, it was discussed what should be done to promote the use of women's capabilities in Japan, the progress of which is hard to observe in this country. It is insufficient for the government to launch certain measures and systems. Ms. UCHINAGA indicated the necessity of the commitments of companies' top managers to strategies for utilizing women's capabilities. Ms. KOMORITA said that it was necessary to establish a corporate climate where women could fully demonstrate their abilities.



Panelists

The discussion concluded with the audience asking questions and voicing comments. A female company manager in the audience said, "A numerical target is set up at my workplace for the promotion of female employees, about which I feel uncomfortable. I often think that I've been promoted only thanks to this target.", Ms. UCHINAGA replied, "Even if you are told that you have been promoted to manager just because you are a woman, you need never care about that. The reality is that the percentage of female managers is still very small. This does not mean that women are inferior to men, but that women have been placed in an environment where they cannot fully demonstrate their abilities for various reasons. Many women are not mentally ready, but that is not a reason to refuse opportunities given. Without fear of making mistakes, you should do your best in cooperation with your subordinates, coworkers, and bosses." Her comment was so encouraging that the audience, most of whom were women, felt greatly emboldened.